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SUBJECT: NORTHERN GREECE MUSLIMS, FAR RIGHT AND LEFT PARTIES
CRITICIZE NEW LAW STRENGTHENING MINORITY RIGHTS

REF: A. 07 THESSALONIKI 19, B. 06 THESSALONIKI 134, C. 07 THESSALONIKI 72, D. 07 THESSALONIKI 132
THESSALONI 00000012 001.2 OF 002

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On February 6, the Greek Parliament adopted a law that strengthens the rights of Thrace's Muslim minority by (1) transferring government control over Muslim charitable foundations (wakfs) to local Muslims, and (2) establishing a 0.5 percent employment quota for Muslims in Greece's public sector. The two steps were part of a package of measures announced by Greek MFA Dora Bakoyannis in February 2007. Thrace Muslims, including Parliament's only two Muslim deputies, complain that the law still allows the government to intervene in the community's religious affairs, and fails to address their longstanding demands to elect muftis and allow ethnic Turks to self-identify as "Turkish." Extreme right LAOS deputies, meanwhile, called the establishment of a Muslim minority employment quota "racist" and discriminatory against other religions. Coalition of the Left and the Communist Party also criticized the law for establishing policy based on ethnicity.
END SUMMARY

MUSLIMS REGAIN CONTROL OVER CHARITABLE FOUNDATIONS/WAKFS

12. (SBU) The Greek Parliament passed a law on February 6 implementing two of several measures announced by MFA Dora Bakoyannis last February intended to strengthen the rights of Thrace's 100-120,000 (mostly Turkophone) Muslims (ref A). The law gives Muslims greater control over charitable foundations, or wakfs, which play a key role in Muslim communities by generating income for educational, religious and cultural activities. Specifically, the new law allows Thrace Muslims to elect the management boards of wakfs in their community, reversing a 1980 law under which only the government appointed wakf board members. The new law, however, allows the government-appointed regional governor (periferiarchis) to appoint wakf board members in certain (unspecified) cases. Wakf boards will also be required to provide an annual financial report to the government-appointed muftis. Muslims have objected to the law's provisions for "intervention" by the regional governor and oversight by the official muftis. [Note: Parliament's two Muslim MPs (both PASOK) criticized these provisions but voted for the law. End note].

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FOR MUSLIMS IN GREECE'S PUBLIC SECTOR

13. (SBU) The new law also establishes a 0.5 percent quota for Thrace Muslims in Greece's highly coveted public sector. The law does not provide a mechanism, timeline or other details regarding implementation. (Note: Thrace Muslims make up approximately 1.0 percent of the population countrywide. A 0.5 percent quota is already in effect for Muslims in Greek universities. End note) Muslim leaders have expressed concern that the public sector quota could draw talented young Muslims out of Thrace to take civil service jobs in large cities, thus weakening Thrace's Muslim community. Influential former MP from Thrace Ilhan Ahmed, however, strongly supports the public sector quota. Some Thrace [non-Muslim] citizens have initiated a petition criticizing the quota as discriminatory against Christians. LAOS has called the quota "racist" and leftist

parties have objected to it as race-based policy.

14. (SBU) The new law is the latest of several steps the GoG has taken to implement the package of initiatives announced by Bakoyannis last February. The status of the other initiatives follows below:

-- CANCELLATION of debt owed by wakfs: Parliament voted last March to cancel tax debts owed by wakfs, estimated at over Euros 6 million. According to post contacts, despite this legislative decision, Thrace tax authorities have not received formal instructions from the Ministry of Finance cancelling the debts, leaving their status ambiguous.

-- RE-INSTATEMENT OF "STATELESS" MUSLIMS PROGRESSING: Shortly after Bakoyannis' February 2007 announcement, the GoG re-instated the citizenship of about 46 persons from Thrace who had lost Greek citizenship under Article 19 (repealed in 1998) of the Greek Constitution, a provision which deprived thousands of (ethnically Turkish) Greeks of citizenship when they "deserted" Greek territory, e.g. stayed abroad for a long period of time (ref B). An MFA contact told us recently there are fewer than 10 outstanding claims for re-instatement. He could not explain the delay in processing the claims. Muslim activists estimate there are 350 to 500 stateless Muslims who have not registered for re-instatement. Some Turkish authorities claim the number is much higher.

-- HIRING OF 240 IMAMS APPROVED BUT ON HOLD: Parliament passed a law in March 2007 authorizing the government to hire 240 imams to assist in the religious education of the Muslim minority in Thrace. No imams have agreed to be hired, however. Muslims

THESSALONI 00000012 002.2 OF 002

strongly object to the law's provision for the imams to be appointed by a committee comprised of Christians (i.e. representatives of the Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs, as well as three academics). A GoG contact told us some imams are willing to accept a government appointment but are intimidated from doing so by "radicals."

-- HELPING MUSLIMS WITH EDUCATION AND JOBS: In September, the government completed a vocational training program announced by Bakoyannis last February for 1175 Muslim women, funded by the EU. Since last February, the GoG has created two "second chance" schools that help adults obtain high school diplomas. Muslims continue to complain about the poor quality of schools serving Thrace Muslims and demand more schools that can provide instruction in Turkish.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: Last February, FM Bakoyannis said the goal behind her proposed measures was to help transform Thrace from an area of "concern" to one of "hope." Muslims, however, have reacted skeptically, especially as implementation lagged, and showed their disappointment in September 16 national elections (ref C). In order to improve its standing with Thrace Muslims and prevent further rise in the low level of Muslim political activism, the GoG will need to address more high priority Muslim demands, including better economic prospects and the right of Muslims to choose their religious leaders (muftis) and self-identify collectively as "Turkish."

16. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: The GoG remains highly sensitive to criticism about its treatment of the Turkish minority, especially from Turkey, which many Greeks believe harbors irredentist designs on Thrace. Greece also rejects Turkish attempts to link progress on Thrace minority issues with progress on Greek minority issues in Turkey. Still, there are signs Greece recognizes the advantages of removing this irritant in bilateral relations. The Greek Parliament tabled the new law during Turkish FM Babacan's early December visit to Athens and Thrace (ref D) and passed it soon after PM Karamanlis's late January visit to Ankara, despite domestic criticism. Further steps from Greece, however, will likely require corresponding gestures from Turkey, e.g. on Halki Seminary and the Ecumenical Patriarch.

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